
**“Filling a Void” vs.
“Crowding the Space”:
Gendered Representations of
Stepmothers within Sociology Textbooks**

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Sociologists are calling for more attention to the diversity of experience in stepfamilies regarding not only the stepfamily’s uniqueness relative to the nuclear family, but also the differing experiences of the members within stepfamilies themselves (Gamanche 1997; Sweeny 2010). This paper examines gendered representations of stepparents within sociology textbooks. The underlying hypothesis of this study is that gender influences stepparent coverage, with stepmothers possibly underrepresented in the curriculum. In general, the findings were relatively consistent with this hypothesis.

Stepfamilies are an increasingly common family form (Johnson 2008), and the U.S Census has reported that 15% of all children are living in stepfamily households, a figure that translates to roughly 10.6 million children (Kreider 2005). Estimates suggest that close to one-third of all Americans will get married, divorce, and remarry (Cherlin and

Furstenberg 1994). This estimate focuses on those who are legally married, but cohabitation is also an increasing and important consideration in post-marital family arrangements involving children (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994).

By 1998, 43% of unmarried cohabitating couples included children, up from 29% in 1978 (Bianchi and Casper 2000). In 1998, of the 2.1 million unmarried fathers, 33% were cohabitating, more than twice the 13% for unmarried mothers (Bianchi and Casper 2000). Scott Coltrane notes that in post-divorce parenting arrangements "the number of men with joint residential custody has grown" and that "the actual involvement of fathers with children after divorce varies enormously sometimes without regard to official post-divorce court orders" (2004).

A recent report states that over 300,000 children are living with their biological fathers and cohabitating partners (Kreider 2005). The assumption that all of these families are stepmother families is incorrect. This assumption would ignore the many same sex partners involved in stepfamilies whose legal inability to marry forces them into cohabiting relationships. However, it is also true that many nonresidential stepfamilies, which are often stepmother families, are still undercounted in the census data and in that way marginalized within the family statistics.

Some researchers go further and argue that the definition of the immediate family "based on the adults' legal relationship to each other discourages the interactions between parents and extended kin" (Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis 1993). They encourage a "pedi-focal" approach and suggest changing "the bases of family relations from legal arrangements . . . to arrangements based on the child's needs" (Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis 1993). The pedi-focal approach places the child in the center and "assumes that the children belong to the community and are the responsibility of any adults who are able to contribute to the child's well being" (Crosbie-Burnette and Lewis

1993). One could speculate on the enormous difficulty involved in counting individuals with this framework.

Regardless of the approach demographers utilize to count families, the complexities facing them remain consistent. With increasing divorce rates, cohabitation, and non-marital childbearing, a significant number of children will most likely spend some time in a stepfamily (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). Therefore, researchers need to go beyond census reports of households. It seems that, until recently, researchers have focused primarily on stepfather families or the context of child outcomes rather than the adult interactions. With fathers' rights increasing and more states advocating joint custody, one might speculate that the presence of stepmothers may be increasing as well. Consequently, sociology as a discipline could benefit from an assessment of what is known about stepmothers and how this information is presented to sociology students.

Within the context of sociology, textbooks play a role in shaping the curriculum, and textbooks themselves are an important way in which sociological research is conveyed to the general public. Case studies, themes, statistics, and theory are often repeated in a multitude of different ways within their pages. Lower-division courses on marriage and family are common classes that many instructors are required to teach regardless of their concentrations or areas of interest. Potentially, some instructors may teach only what is in the textbook on stepfamilies, if they assign those chapters at all. Similarly, if the stepfamily takes a backseat to first marriage and the nuclear family in the textbook, discussion of stepfamilies in the classroom may also be limited. It is also likely that students in marriage and family classes will look for reflections of their own family types in order to connect to the material. In this way, textbooks have the potential to reconstruct or reinforce students' own notions of family.

Previous Studies

Earlier studies have explored the presentation of the stepfamily in marriage and family textbooks. In 1976, E.M. Rallings claimed that “stepparenting was either ignored or treated briefly and superficially in marriage and family textbooks” (Coleman et al. 1994). In response, researchers carried out an initial assessment of twenty-six major textbooks with findings that support Rallings’ assertion (Nolan, Coleman, and Ganong 1984). Two of the original researchers reexamined the study 10 years later and found a slight improvement from the 1984 study (Coleman, Ganong, and Goodwin 1994). Taken together, these studies reflect definite change in the presentation of the stepfamily within sociology textbooks.

The focus of the initial study was to understand the “presentation of the information on stepfamilies” (Nolan et al. 1984). In their analysis, researchers found little empirical information on stepfamilies. The information available to readers was based on clinical and self-help sources and was “included in a cursory fashion” (p. 559). The researchers coded for key words ranging from stepparent, reconstituted families, and even included single parent families in an attempt to assess the number of pages devoted to stepfamilies. The difficulties they described were related to “stepfamily material” being relevant to several chapter headings and they noted that “it was not unusual to find references to stepparents and stepchildren in more than one section of a book” (p. 560). To offset that difficulty, they were generous in defining attributes and included pictures as text, most likely increasing the page count at least slightly.

At the time of Nolan’s study, the “most comprehensive discussion of stepfamilies” was one case of 13 pages scattered throughout the entire text, with other authors not including stepfamilies at all. The textbooks that did cover stepfamilies included discussion of topics such as financial issues, incest, legalities, kinship terms, loyalty, the influence of ex-spouses

on step family dynamics, and death vs. divorce. Many of these topics are still present in the textbooks examined in the current study.

Nolan and colleagues concluded that the textbooks “present limited information on stepfamilies” with many of them situating stepfamilies as “secondary to remarriage.” Most of the texts based the information “on older” or “clinical work and popular self-help studies.” The researchers suggest that this could lead authors unknowingly to adopt a “negative deficit-family model approach to stepfamilies” (1984 p. 565). In the original textbooks, the deficit-model can be seen when the discussion focuses on the challenges of stepfamilies rather than the successes and a “greater than usual incidence of giving recommendations” (Coleman et al. 1994).

By 1994, the research base on stepfamilies had grown. Consequently, the focus of the 1994 study explored whether the new coverage of stepfamilies reflected “the vastly expanded body of empirical and theoretical work” (Coleman et al. 1994). In the final sample of twenty-six textbooks, five were later editions of texts from the original study. Researchers identified chapters and page numbers by key words such as stepfamily, stepfather, stepmother, binuclear, or reconstituted. They employed a coding scheme shaped partially by the findings from the 1984 review (p. 290). The content coding scheme was intended to assess how much information on stepfamilies was present in the textbooks, the basis for that information, and whether the coverage reflected the family-deficit model that was present in the prior analysis.

Coleman et al. found that the “post-1990 texts contained much more information on stepfamilies.” Of the twenty-six texts reviewed, seventeen “devoted ten pages or more,” twelve had more than twenty pages, and several authors included “entire chapters on remarried families” (p. 290). When compared to the 1984 study in which only two texts contained more than ten pages and many authors simply ignored stepfamilies altogether,

the decade shows considerable amounts of change. Overall, the researchers established that the 1990 textbooks did a “much better job of including material” on the stepfamily (p. 295).

By 1994, the textbook authors discussed a wider range of “potential benefits of remarriage” and “possible difficulties” facing stepfamilies. The authors of the textbooks showed a distancing from clinical citations in favor of more empirical sources and the advice that authors chose to include “reflected new material” (p. 295). In the later textbooks the deficit-family model has less presence. Still, instructors are cautioned to be “careful readers” as “subtle, but meaningful differences in how remarried families are portrayed” still remain (p. 295). It is clear that authors of the post-1990 textbooks grappled with the interpretations of the “sometimes incomplete or mixed evidence available in the empirical literature” and could not arrive at uniform answers to questions about satisfaction in remarriage or child-well being (p. 296).

It is interesting to note that a few of the texts reviewed in 1994 actually contained stepfamily chapters. Coleman and colleagues (1994) saw this shift as an improvement made in the prior decade. However, they also raise the question of whether isolating this information in its own chapter is a way to highlight the material or a form of ghettoization. While they did not provide a specific answer to the question, they left their readers with a thoughtful discussion of existing notions of family.

Although the current study is grounded in these initial examinations, it still remains fundamentally different with its primary focus being on the gendered representations within the texts. While many of the findings overlap and suggest some continued improvement in the past sixteen years, the lack of attention to the gendered dynamics of the previous studies leaves gaps in our knowledge this study attempts to fill.

Methods

This study is contextualized within the larger framework of the presentation of stepfamilies in the textbooks. It examines the representations of stepmothers relative to that of stepfathers and asks if the gender of the stepparent influences the quality and quantity of their representation within the textbooks. With current custody patterns reflecting a larger percentage of custodial stepfathers, a smaller percentage of residential stepmothers and an unknown number of noncustodial stepmothers, it makes sense to expect that the textbooks would reflect this diversity. The textbooks that instructors use within the classroom are good indicators of what makes it into the sociology curriculum. Consequently, an analysis of marriage and family textbooks is a good starting point to examine what sociology has to say about stepfamilies in general.

To test my hypothesis that gender played an important role in representations of stepparents in sociology textbooks, I utilized primary content analysis of current sociology marriage and family textbooks. I acquired a list of the top ten textbooks on the market as of April 2010 from McGraw-Hill publishers. I analyzed five of the most recent editions of those texts for the study. This list included textbooks from three publishers: Cengage, Prentice Hall, and McGraw-Hill. The final sample included only the latter two publishers and contained the following titles: the seventh edition of Nijole Benokraitis's *Marriages and Families: Changes, Choices, and Constraints* (2010); the sixth edition of Andrew Cherlin's *Public and Private Families: An Introduction* (2010); the eighth edition of Mary Kay DeGenova, Nick Stinnett, and Nancy Stinnett's *Intimate Relationships, Marriages, and Families* (2010); the seventh edition of Robert and Jeanette Lauer's *Marriage and Family: The Quest for Intimacy* (2009); and the sixth edition of David Olsen, John DeFrain, and Linda Skogrand's *Marriages and Families: Intimacy, Diversity, and Strengths* (2008). Three

of the textbooks—Benokraitis, 2010; Lauer and Lauer, 2009; and Olsen et al, 2008—were later editions of those reviewed in the 1994 study.

To assess the general amount and quality of coverage, I coded the texts for a variety of attributes. The analysis itself is largely qualitative, but includes some quantitative measures. The main focuses of the quantitative aspects were a matter of quantity, context, and voice. Under these broad headings, I coded for certain attributes including line counts, page counts, chapter lengths, quotation counts, number of citations, referenced articles, and location of information within the texts. Qualitatively, I coded the texts under three general headings. The first of those headings concerned gendered examples: how often the certain family form is used to illustrate a general point. The second heading was language, titles and descriptions: how often the stepparent was described as a friend or a parent or presented as able to love the stepchildren. The third heading, resources and influences of the stepparent, included the economic or emotional resources a stepparent brings and the either harmful or beneficial effects of the stepparent family types.

Some attributes overlapped both the qualitative and quantitative analysis including the types of quotations used as either direct or indirect, the use of citations to support the information provided, and the location of the information stepparents in the main body of the text versus text-boxes. In my general analysis, this classification does not differentiate between texts with a heavy use versus a brief mention of specific attributes. Details on the number of instances of specific attributes by text, however, is available for reference in Figures 1-6.

A Matter of Coverage

Within all of the texts the stepfamily chapter was either the last or second to last chapter; in this way, all authors discussed stepparenting

outside of the larger discussions on motherhood, fatherhood, and parenting. In contrast, the primary chapters on parenting and becoming a parent often included topics such as: adoption, abortion, postponing parenthood, the choice to remain childfree, and myths and realities of motherhood and fatherhood. However, all remained relatively silent about stepparents in these sections.

The overall analysis of the texts resulted in several common qualitative and gendered themes, many of which are easily contrasted with each other. The texts tended to use stepfathers as the primary examples of stepfamily life and stepmothers as the primary examples of stepfamily stereotypes. The authors often described stepfathers as fathers and stepmothers as kin-keepers and caretakers. The textbooks show that stepfathers were economic resources to children while stepmothers were emotional resources. In many cases, the textbooks show stepfathers as beneficial to child-well being, especially in cooperation with the biological father, while often presenting the stepmother in conflict with the biological mother.

Gendered Examples

Stepfamily Life: The term "gendered example" refers to the practice of making a general statement and illustrating it with an example of a stepmother or stepfather family. The gendered examples of the stepfamily were primarily gendered towards the stepfather. As detailed in Figure 1, forty of the fifty-seven gendered examples of stepfamily life drew upon the stepfather family form, while only seventeen focused on the stepmother family form. Some of the examples ranged from defining the stepfamily, offering advice for success and marital happiness, or discussing post divorce legal issues. One text book discussed stepparents as third parties by stating:

In most states the stepparent has no legal obligation to contribute to the support of the stepchildren even if he has lived with them for years and the nonresident biological parent has paid nothing. And if the stepparent and custodial parent get divorced, the stepparent has no further obligation to support the stepchildren, even if he had been supporting them informally for years (Cherlin 2010).

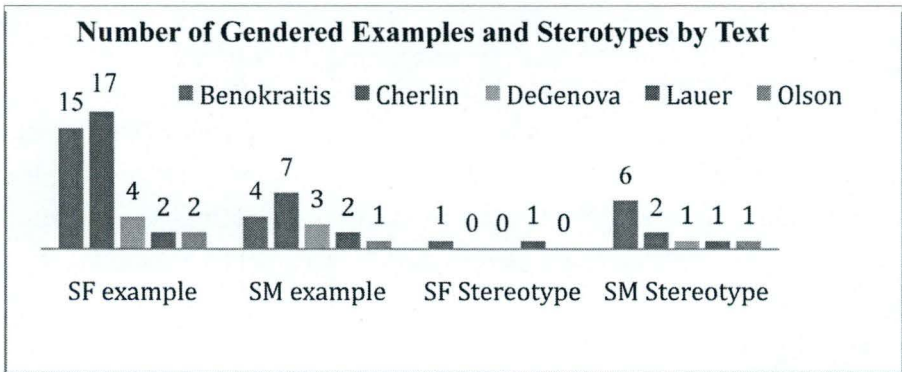


Figure 1: SF: Stepfather, SM: Stepmother; Gendered examples is the practice of illustrating an otherwise gender neutral point about a stepfamily life or stereotype with an example of a gendered stepfamily form.

In the statement above, the author attempts to be gender neutral by using terms such as “stepparent,” “biological” “custodial” or “nonresidential” parent. However, the authors lose the neutrality of that approach with the gendered pronoun “he” that is scattered throughout the statement.

In another text, while discussing Visser and Visser’s seven characteristics of successful stepfamilies, the author notes:

a stepparent is catapulted into a parenting role, whereas a biological parent’s relationship with a child develops over many years. One of the biggest mistakes that stepfathers make, usually with their wife’s encouragement, is assuming an active parenting role too early in the marriage and presuming an intimacy and authority that they have not yet earned (Benokraitis 2010).

Again we see a gender neutral attempt with a stepfather qualification. Further, at least one study, involving sixty-four remarried couples from northern Israel, calls into question the statement about a wife’s encouragement of stepfathers taking an active parenting role. Erera-Weatherly (1996) found that “birth mothers tended to be highly sensitive and not quite trusting about the way the spouses treated their children” with birth fathers tending to “express complete trust in their wives conduct towards their children” (Weatherly 1996).

Many of the texts work to broaden the definition of the stepfamily beyond legal ties while still maintaining an implicit focus on stepfathers. For example Cherlin noted:

I will use the term cohabitating stepfamily to mean only the kind of stepfamily in which the partners are cohabitating; I will use the parallel term married stepfamily to mean only those in which the partners are married. Our definition also does not require that the biological parent in the stepfamily was previously married to, and then divorced, the biological father of her children. Rather it allows for the previous relationship to have been outside of marriage (Cherlin 2010).

Some examples in the texts were gendered towards the stepmother as well, but they were less prevalent and often carried a different tone. The discussion of stepchildren and their influence on the marital relationship provides the following example gendered towards the stepmother:

Coming into an instant family and dealing with the challenges and issues of that stage of the family life cycle may not be fully compatible with the stepparent’s individual stage of life. As one stepmother puts it, “I do my best. I really do like my stepdaughter. But I find myself still thinking about the fact that I am raising another woman’s child. And meanwhile I am trying to establish my career. It’s not quite fair. But I remind myself that I do like her and that she is my husband’s child” (Lauer and Lauer 2009).

Stepfamily Stereotypes: Like general claims about stepfamily life, many of the texts illustrated general comments about stepfamily stereotypes with gendered examples. Of the thirteen gendered examples referring to a stereotype, eleven of them were stepmother examples (see Figure 1). In discussing the range of things stepfamilies can do to improve their chances at success, Olsen advised new stepparents to tread carefully:

When a stepparent enters the family, children truly know that their mother and father will never get back together. This can cause bitterness and despair. The stepparent can become the personification of evil in the child's mind: 'If only **she** weren't around, Mom and Dad would get back together' (Olson et al. 2008, emphasis in original).

Authors discussed how the "abundant illustrations of disastrous efforts at step-mothering" combined with the "long cultural tradition of the evil-stepmother myth" do not help "the challenges of step-mothering" (Lauer and Lauer 2009). Those discussions raise the question of whether describing the stepparent as the "personification of evil" only serves to reinforce rather than deconstruct the "evil-stepmother myth."

In the discussions of stereotypes, little attention has focused on stepfathers as potential perpetrators of abuse. The two stepfather examples that discussed the stepfather as possible abusers were coded as stereotypes when the specific passage lacked research citations to support the claims (Benokraitis 2010) or because a cited study focused on perceptions of stepfathers as potential abusers (Lauer and Lauer 2009). There is reason to believe that the "stepfather as an abuser" should be discussed as a stereotype because "not all family violence researchers agree that having a stepfather should be included in a list of abuse risk factors" (Claxton-Oldfield and Whitt 2003).

Interestingly, Lauer and Lauer cite the latter study by noting that the

original study ends with the comment that the “majority” of respondents “did not believe that stepfathers are more likely to perpetuate abuse than are biological fathers” (Claxton-Oldfield 2003). However, the reference in the textbook focused on the other side of that statement focusing the attention on the “45.5 percent [who] believed that children who live with a stepfather are at greater risk of sexual and physical abuse.” The authors claim that “these negative perceptions may be rooted, at least in part, in experience” because studies showed that “stepparents report significantly fewer activities with and less positive response to children than do biological parents (Lauer and Lauer 2009). If the textbooks presented the stepfather as an abuser with more substantial research cited, it was coded separately (Benokraitis 2010).

Language, Titles and Descriptors

The examples of the “unloving” and “indifferent” stepmothers contrast with the examples of the “involved” and “devoted” stepfather. Cherlin acknowledges that active and involved stepfathers “often find that their involvement with stepchildren alters their sense of themselves, such as by deepening their sense of purpose and responsibility.” He goes on to recognize that “they are, however, a minority” (Cherlin 2010).

Parents and Kin-keepers: In the discussion of stepparents as parental figures, most of the texts made reference to the stepdad as a father or father-like figure (Benokraitis 2010; Cherlin 2010; DeGenova 2010; Lauer and Lauer 2009). For details, see Figure 2. In contrast, two texts referenced a stepmother as “like a mother,” and one compared her to a “career oriented” biological mother who deviated from expected maternal behavior (Cherlin 2010; Lauer and Lauer 2009). However, three texts did note the caretaking role often taken on by stepmothers (Benokraitis 2010; DeGenova 2010; Lauer and Lauer 2009). One text recognized the caretaking role as a factor

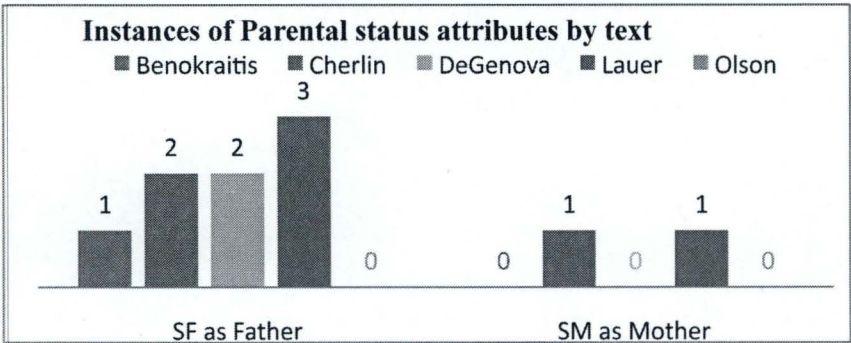


Figure 2: SF: Stepfather; SM: Stepmother

that makes nonresidential step-mothering more challenging:

When the stepchild is in the home, the stepmother, rather than the child’s father, is likely to have the extra work of cleaning and cooking. The stepmother is called on to assume a burden that will have little or no emotional benefit to her. Not only is the stepchild not hers, but she may feel that the father is involving his ex-wife more than her in the parenting process (Lauer and Lauer 2009).

Naming: The ideas of parental status can also be seen in the subtle differences in language and naming. The names and titles given to step-parents throughout the texts range from the expected “stepmother,” “step-father,” and “stepparent” to “the woman” the “new-wife” and the “devoted stepdad.” Issues of naming can be seen in the following example:

Everyday [stepfamilies] faced issues and problems people in first marriages never dream of, such as, Does a stepfather have the authority to discipline his stepchild if the child has done something wrong? What does a child call the woman his father married after he divorced the child’s mother? (Cherlin 2010).

These questions contrast the benign use of stepfather with the weighted title of “the woman.” The issue of naming is seen in other texts as well. In

some examples of naming the "step" is dropped for "dad" and abbreviated for "smom":

The name that children call a stepfather—whether he is married or cohabitating—has a special meaning for men. Actually hearing oneself called 'Dad' as opposed to one's first name or 'stepdad,' is a sign of acceptance and belonging. Many stepfathers still remember hearing 'Daddy' or 'Dad' as a thrilling and momentous moment because the use of kinship terms goes hand in hand with a feeling of genuine fatherhood (Benokraitis 2010.)

One stepmother was uncomfortable with her three young children calling her by her first name (as her husband does) because it seemed impersonal and disrespectful. This was her solution: "I did not want to confuse the children by asking them to call me 'Mom,' since they already have a mother. So, I came up with a name that worked—"Smom"" (Benokraitis 2010).

The concepts in these passages are an important reality in stepfamily life, but the passages themselves encompass almost the entirety of the particular text's discussion of naming. In this way, the above contrast has the potential to leave readers with an either-or impression, with stepfathers being parents, and stepmothers being "smoms."

Resources and Influences

The Beneficial Provider: Besides parental status, the textbooks revealed differences in the presentation of resources a stepparent brings. Several of the authors described a stepfather's existence in a family as beneficial to child outcomes (Benokraitis 2010; Cherlin 2010; DeGenova 2010; Lauer and Lauer 2009). Those authors grounded the benefits of the stepfather in his presence as an economic resource, an additional parental figure, and an "important role model" (Benokraitis 2010). Authors often described how many of the benefits of stepfather family types were associated with

cooperative relationships between the stepfather and biological-father.

In several of the texts, authors mentioned legal ties and issues of child support in association with the stepfather (Benokraitis 2010; Cherlin 2010; DeGenova 2010; Olson 2008). In this way they presented stepfathers as an economic resource for the children who had little or no post-divorce rights or responsibilities. One text highlighted, in great detail, a widowed stepfather who after years of “being [the children’s] dad” lost custody of his step children. This same text mentioned briefly, in a text box, a situation in which the courts awarded custody to a residential stepmother after deeming that the children “viewed their stepmother as their mother figure” (Cherlin 2010). However, overall, the textbooks were mostly silent on post-divorce issues as related to stepmothers.

One instance in which a stepmother was presented as an economic resource in a text-box titled “*My husband’s first wife is straining our marriage*” (Lauer and Lauer 2009). The content of this box focused primarily on financial issues and the conflict they caused between the women. The stepmother in this situation went to a lawyer to see what her rights were in regards to her salary “not being used to support” her stepchild. In this way, the textbook presented her as unwilling economic resource for the child.

The Emotional Supporter: The stepmother’s presence was a source of conflict with the biological mother. The conflict was present in much of the information on the stepmother. Overall, if the authors of the textbooks saw stepmothers as a resource at all, the tendency was to present stepmothers as sources of emotional support for the stepchildren in their lives (see Figure 3). In some cases, the emotional support that stepmothers provided was a source of resentment and anger for the stepmother with many stepmothers angry about “spending much of their time and energy on live-in stepchildren and receiving few rewards” (Benokraitis 2010).

Only one text connected stepfathers with emotional resources with the stepfather who was “spending so much time, money, and energy” on the new spouse and step children to the neglect of his own biological children” (Olson 2008).

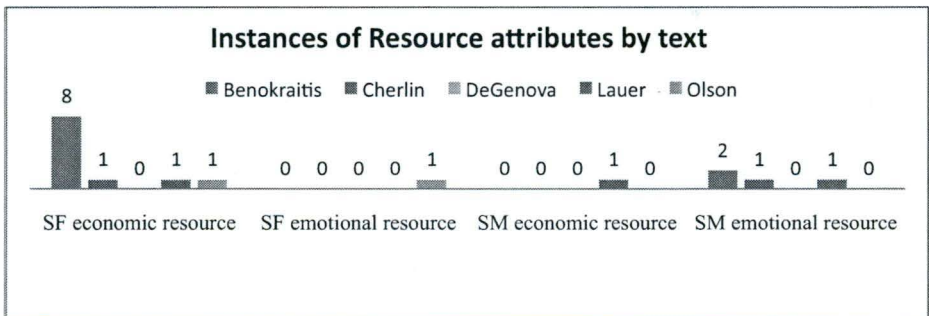


Figure 3: SF: Stepfather; SM: Stepmother

A Matter of Quantity, Quality, and Context

The context of coverage refers to where the information is in the text: primary text versus text-box text or whether the information has a separate heading distinguishing the specific information from the rest of the text. The analysis of the context of coverage also includes looking at what type of text it is: research-based information or personal quotes and experiences and the quality of the text as revealed in the references from which the authors drew.

An initial line count shows stepmothers with slightly more coverage than stepfathers: 359 and 321 lines respectively with a 38 line difference between genders. The line count is the aggregate of all focused discussion of stepmother or stepfather information. It includes sections devoted to their experiences as well as the gendered examples discussed in the qualitative section. The line count includes chapter summaries and text-box discussions.

As we can see in Figure 4, however, the picture changes when we

remove direct and indirect quotes from the total count, with 251 lines left for stepmothers and 277 left for stepfathers and a 26 line difference. This adjustment shows that the coverage remains skewed toward stepfathers.

In continuing to break down the amount of coverage in the text we see another shift in the numbers. For example, the textbooks devote a larger amount of primary text given to stepfathers with a large amount of stepmother coverage being found within textboxes. Stepmothers received 177 lines of primary texts compared to 277 lines for stepfathers. The difference in locations of coverage resulted in a 100 line difference between the genders in regards to primary text coverage.

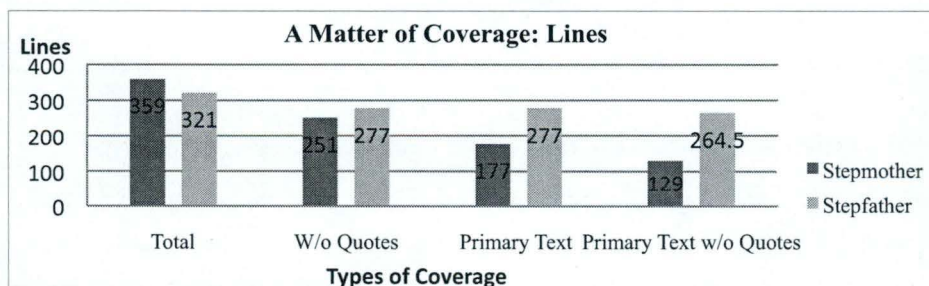


Figure 4: Line count is inclusive of all texts. Primary text is all text under section headings inclusive of chapter summaries and quotes excluding text found in “Text-Boxes.”

A Matter of Voice

How the authors used quotes gives us additional perspectives on the quality and context of coverage. As shown in Figure 5, on the whole, stepmothers receive more quotes both direct and indirect. Direct quotes refer to quotations from the stepparent’s perspective and indirect refers to quotations about stepparents from the perspective of the stepchild, spouse, or other third person. The overall amount of direct quotations suggests that stepmothers may have more of a personal “voice” within the text.

When direct quotations are separated by location in text we see

slightly more than half of the stepmother quotes occur within text boxes. All indirect quotes occurred within the primary text for both genders. The remaining count of 48 lines of quotes for stepmothers compared to 12.5 lines for stepfathers shows that stepmothers have almost four times as much primary text devoted to personal perspective and experience. The relationship is reversed for indirect quotes with stepfathers having almost four times as much indirect quotation as stepmothers with 8 lines and 31 lines respectively.

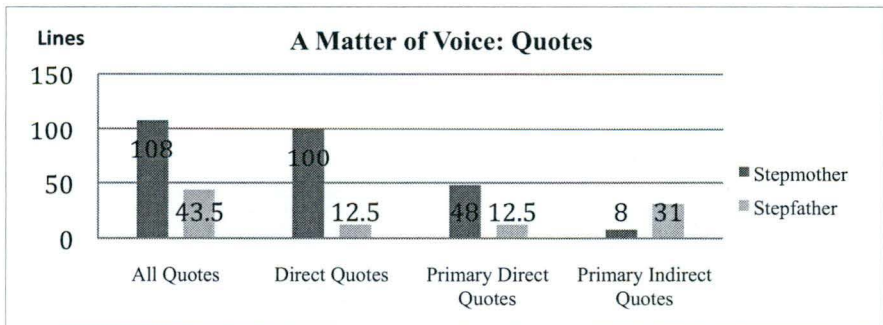


Figure 5: Total quote count of all texts. “Direct” means from the individual, “indirect” means about the individual. Primary text is all text under the section headings and not within a textbox.

When line counts of the primary direct quotes are subtracted from the primary-text line-counts for each gender we arrive at 129 lines and 264.5 lines for stepmothers and stepfathers respectively. The average page length in the texts is 82.4 lines. This means that with 3.21 pages stepfathers have about two times as much non-quote coverage as the 1.6 pages given to stepmothers. For reference, the average chapter length across all five texts is 26.2 pages.

A Matter of Quality

Across the texts, the authors used a wide variety of sources. As with the textbooks in the 1994 study, many of the current texts relied heavily on

peer-reviewed journal articles. The journals themselves spanned a variety of disciplines including sociology, psychology, child-development, family law, and education. The following journals were the most heavily cited: *Family Relations*, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, and *Marriage and Family Review*. With 25 separate citations, the *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* was the most cited source.

The majority of the authors relied on U.S. census reports and the National Center for Health Statistics for statistics on remarriage and the stepfamily—with one text citing secondary sources such as stepfamily.org for statistical information (DeGenova et al. 2010). Some interesting, though not common, citations include: *The Christian Science Monitor* and other popular newspapers (Benokraitis 2010), the Christian website successfulstepfamilies.com, and Lauer and Lauer, a textbook in the current sample, is a heavily cited source in one text (DeGenova et al. 2010). These individual characteristics speak to the diversity of coverage found in the sample of textbooks.

In general, there were 268 individual referenced sources across all the texts. Journal articles accounted for 190 of those references with 120 articles cited in reference to stepfamilies and 70 cited in reference to remarriage. Many sources were cited more than once and in more than one text. The overall number of citations was 535. The number of citations referring to specific material about the stepfather's or stepmother's experience was 45 and 24 respectively. This suggests that claims not clearly cited with research were used almost twice as often for stepmother material than used for stepfather material.

With current patterns of custody, the discrepancies in citations could be representative of the studies available to the authors. To assess this possibility, I analyzed a random sample of referenced articles. I reviewed

all obtainable texts and abstracts to determine the study’s focus. Some characteristics that determined the focus of the study included the sample sizes of either stepparent and the study’s hypothesis or conclusion. If an otherwise “neutral” study had a sample clearly consisting of mostly stepfathers I coded it as being about stepfathers. I applied the same method to stepmother sample. The preliminary findings from the sample show that the studies themselves had the highest focus on neither stepparent and the lowest focus on stepmothers.

Of the 49 articles 48% focused on issues such as remarriage, child well-being, and divorce, while 22% focused on both genders in general (see Figure 6). Stepfathers were the focus of 24% of the studies and 6% focused on the stepmother. For added perspective, the 6% figure represents 3 studies, and the 24% represents 12 studies. Of the three studies on stepmothers only one clearly had stepmothers as a primary focus (King 2007). The other studies were adolescent perceptions of their stepmothers (Crohn 2006) and stepparents’ responses to stepfamily therapy with a larger response rate, and therefore sample size, from women (Visher and

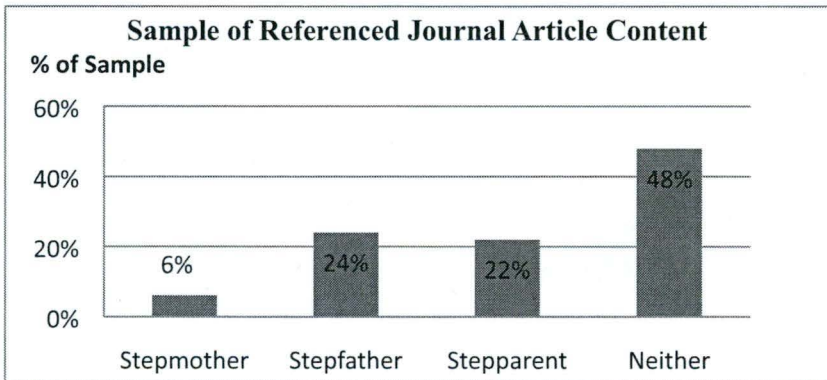


Figure 6: A sample, drawn using a random number generator, of citations from all five texts referring to stepfamilies. The category “Neither” focuses on remarriage, divorce, and adolescent well-being. The “Stepparent” category is neutrally focused on both genders with mostly equal sample sizes of both.

Visher 1997). An additional analysis is needed to confirm the preliminary findings as well as compare the research available with the research included in the texts.

Discussion

Introductory textbooks have continued to improve their presentation of the stepfamily over the past sixteen years. Authors have also attempted to incorporate more diverse examples of stepfamilies. Nevertheless, the fear expressed by Coleman and colleagues (1994) that “authors would be severely challenged” to do so in an “understandable and non-stigmatizing way” has proven to be true. This challenge can be seen in the principle findings of this study. Overall, the discussion of stepfamilies remains separate from the larger discussion of family and parenting. Thus, textbook authors continue to marginalize stepfamilies, even if unintentionally, by implicitly portraying them as deviant from the nuclear family model.

The results suggest that the quality, nature, and context of stepparent coverage within marriage and family textbooks are, in fact, influenced by the gender of the stepparent. With the text-box coverage gendered towards the stepmother and the primary coverage being gendered towards the stepfather, the stepmother family form may bear the brunt of the marginalization of stepfamilies as a whole. The observed attention on stepfamilies and stepmothers specifically in the textbooks may easily be attributed to the current living situations of children in the U.S. However, the focus on custodial household statistics as the basis for the type of coverage stepfamilies receive may also be a part of the larger problem of their representation within the curriculum as well as their experience within the family.

The difference in parental status for stepparents and the gendered nature of conflict between the stepparents and biological parents may be

attributed to the nature of the stepparent roles, with stepfathers “filling a void” and stepmothers “crowding the space” (Cherlin 2010). While these are valid influences, little, if any, discussion of the other influences in stepfamily life is present. The omission of further discussion is similar, in some respects, to one found in the 1994 study regarding the discussion of stereotypes without elaborating on the “socially constructed aspects of marriage and family dynamics” (Coleman et al 1994).

Many of the texts could be improved with further discussions of the influences of gendered household labor dynamics and how the expectations of the husbands on stepmothers to fill that role contribute to challenges and conflict. Also, additional attention on the conflict between biological parents and how that may negatively influence stepparent-child relationships is needed. Although the authors attempt to call attention to the difference in roles that stepmothers and stepfathers experience, their efforts are limited. Further, there are many generic conclusions in the textbooks drawn from primarily stepfather-focused studies yet applied to both genders.

Coleman and colleagues challenged researchers and authors alike to diversify the notion of family and put forth the claim that a marker of successfully meeting that challenge would be an introductory textbook “that integrates a wide variety of examples from all types of families.” They further acknowledged that “if carefully crafted, such an approach could help ‘normalize’ stepfamilies and other marginalized families as viable family forms in our culture” (Coleman et al. 1994). The weight of the evidence suggests that as long as the stepfamily is a marginalized family form, it will continue to be the “incomplete institution” that lacks defined roles and social support as Cherlin (1978) claimed over 30 years ago.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study may make it difficult to generalize the results to marriage and family textbooks and curricula as a whole. The texts themselves are limited mostly to those from McGraw-Hill publishers. Because the sampling could imply that the findings are only representative of editor or publisher choices, this study could benefit from additional textbooks. However, one text published through McGraw-Hill showed significant difference from the others in that overall it included less material in general on most topics concerning the stepfamily (Olsen et al. 2008). This difference suggests that patterns may not be exclusive to publishers.

This study is also limited to my own assessment of the texts and could be improved with multiple coders. In addition to these limitations, textbooks are only a starting point for an analysis of what we teach. Alone, they are not representative of what happens within the classroom. Many instructors may move beyond the text and all students bring their own experiences with them ultimately changing the dynamics of discussion. Interviews and surveys administered to instructors and students are needed to gain a more complete picture of what happens in the classroom.

Conclusion

It seems that in response to the call that more attention be paid to successful stepfamilies, researchers and authors alike have focused primarily on the stepfather family form. This focused positive attention gives “attentive” stepfathers a precarious place within the nuclear family model as a “fill-in father.” However, this is not the case for stepmothers. There are gaps in our knowledge about stepmothers, especially in their experiences of success. These gaps are reflected within the textbooks. When authors do turn their attention to the stepmother, it is often a discussion of stressors and stereotypes with little discussion of possible

causes behind these challenges. The statistical picture of custody might make the limitation of the literature excusable; it does not, however, make it acceptable. Researchers need to go beyond census reports of households and look at all the complexities facing families.

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